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Atari Online News, Etc.  
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~ Hotmail Gets Restored! ~ Tiny Phishing Trick! ~ Dell All-in-One!

-\* PayPal Expects To Blossom! \*-  
-\* Fighting Web Militants, Crude Effort \*-  
-\* US Struggling To Pinpoint Its Cyber Attacks \*-

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->From the Editor's Keyboard

"Saying it like it is!"

Well, I've pretty much run out of time this week to really get going with doing another vicious editorial regarding the economy, or clueless CEOs, or whatever hot issue - and there are many of 'em! - abounds these days.

So, I'll just mention the fact that there are signs of Spring - subtle ones, but they're there. Much of last week's snowstorm has disappeared, and the long-term forecast is for warmer temperatures. To me, that's a bit of long-awaited news! Too much cold, too much cold, too many short and dreary winter days!

An early Happy St. Patrick's Day - we're all Irish on this holiday - to you all. Just be sure to enjoy the holiday, because you never know how that pint of green beer will affect you!

Until next time...

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New Forum: Retro-link.com

Paul Quirk has created a new web forum for users of classic computers. Go to <http://retro-link.com> to see the opening message or to <http://retro-link.com/smf/> to browse. To sign up, send an e-mail to paul(at)retro-link.com

According to Paul, Retro-link.com will be different. This is what he says --

"There will be a new site for enthusiasts of retro computers... It will include other retro computer systems, as demand warrants. That site will be called retro-link. The domain, which has been registered, is at [retro-link.com](http://retro-link.com). I intend to have it ready and open to the public this weekend.

The theme will be a mature, friendly, harassment-free place where people can contribute as much or as little as they wish. It will be a positive place where people can

post questions that have been asked a hundred times without being insulted for doing so. It will be less of a repository of information, and more of a social place to gather and discuss...

The forum seems to be all-encompassing in its eight categories -- General, 8-bit Commodores, Amiga, Atari, Apple, Tandy/TRS-80, Vintage PC, and Others.

Truly,  
Robert Bernardo  
Fresno Commodore User Group  
<http://videocam.net.au/fcug>  
Notacon 6 / Blockparty 3 on April 16-19  
<http://www.notacon.org> , <http://www.demoparty.us>

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING  
compiled by Joe Mirando  
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[Editor's note: Due to the scant number of messages in the Atari newsgroups this week, Joe's column will be delayed a week...hopefully only a week!]

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Your Primary Games System?  
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The Wii Gets a Little More Evil!  
Racing the Beam  
And more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!  
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What's Your Primary Games System?

Nintendo's DS was bound to bounce past 100 million units sold sooner than later. Bets on whether it'll be months or years before Nintendo's tiny two-screened wunderkind surpasses Sony's PlayStation 2 for all-time

best-selling games console? That's right, games \*console\*.

I don't draw the category line between a DS and PS2 or a Sony PSP and an Xbox 360. Today's handhelds pack enough muscle in that the technical differences between a game you play with a gamepad versus a gamepad with a screen (or two) that fits in the palm of your hand are, depending on your tastes, largely incidental.

The PlayStation 2 holds the world record for best-selling video game console ever, somewhere north of 140 million units shipped. That's followed by the original PlayStation at about 102 million. Contrast with Microsoft's 28 million Xbox 360's sold, and the latter suddenly seems like a splash in the bucket.

Now factor in the Nintendo Game Boy and Game Boy Color, which - between 1989 and 1998 - sold 119 million units, placing the platform behind the PlayStation 2 but well ahead of the original PlayStation in aggregate sales. Nintendo's often referred to as the only games company with strings-free sales booty in the bank. With numbers like those, no wonder.

Will handhelds - as notebooks to PCs - eventually trade places as the center of our gaming universe? Will game systems like the Nintendo Wii and PlayStation 3 eventually merge with their handheld cousins?

How many of you still have landline phones?

The Game Boy and Game Boy Color's sales during the 1990s never challenged sales of the Super Nintendo, Nintendo 64, Sony PS1 and PS2, or Microsoft Xbox. The Game Boy was a "plus" accessory. "Plus" PC. Or Mac. Or whatever set top console you sprang for.

But games for today's handhelds are often functionally indistinguishable from their set top peers. Buy Star Wars: The Force Unleashed or X-Men Legends II for the PSP and there's not much reason to pick up the Xbox or PS2 versions. You'd mostly be niggling over the differences between the PSP and set top versions of Marvel Ultimate Alliance or the LEGO Star Wars and Indiana Jones games. And ports of mechanically complex games like Final Fantasy Tactics are actually improvements over the set top originals.

Sure, that's not always the case. Sometimes the ports are emasculated, like all of the Madden games. Or they're handled by entirely different developers, e.g. all of Activision's Spider-Man iterations. And I realize I won't be playing a real-time tactical thinker like THQ's Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II on a PSP or DS anytime soon, much less visual torture tests like Crytek's Crysis or Ubisoft's Far Cry 2.

But the DS's 100 million in sales coupled with the PSP's hugely respectable 50 million add up to a third as many handheld game systems in the wild as the combined worldwide install base of the Wii, Xbox 360, and PS3. Factor the rise of alternative mobile gaming platforms with mass appeal, like Apple's iPhone alongside rumors of expandable mobile screens and sophisticated tactile control surfaces, and - to paraphrase futurist Ray Kurzweil - the mobile gaming singularity may be near.

North American Wii owners got an early holiday present today: Confirmation from global game manufacturer Capcom that it is releasing three versions of its multi-million seller franchise "Resident Evil" for the motion-based game system.

The first, "Resident Evil: The Darkside Chronicles," is promoted as a sequel to "The Umbrella Chronicles," the first of the RE titles to be released on the Wii. The other two titles, "Resident Evil" and "Resident Evil Zero," are re-workings of Nintendo GameCube releases, and are being billed as part of a new RE Classics line.

"We are very excited to be bringing the sequel to Resident Evil: The Umbrella Chronicles to the Wii, as it's the perfect fit for the platform," said Mona Hamilton, vice president, marketing, Capcom Entertainment. "We are always looking for new ways to give Capcom fans a chance to experience our games. Umbrella Chronicles was a huge success for us, Resident Evil: The Darkside Chronicles includes a more in-depth co-op experience, and we are excited to bring this exclusive content to the Wii audience."

Prices for the games are expected to be approximately \$30 per title.

The Resident Evil games are being designed to take advantage of the motion-sense capabilities that have made the Wii gaming system so popular. In single mode, as in most games, players can take advantage of the assistance of an A.I.-controlled character.

With two Wii Remote controllers, however, players can play simultaneously and cooperate with each other as they try to survive wave after wave of hostile zombies. The games will also introduce a new "Evade system" that Capcom says "will utilize the Wii Remote for a more intense experience when fighting enemies."

The announcement about the pending release of Wii versions comes on the eve of Capcom's major event for 2009, the release of "Resident Evil 5." The game, which is set in the mythical African nation of Kijuju, has drawn criticism for perceived racial overtones and pervasively gory violence.

G4 TV reviewer Adam Sessler thinks that the controversy is overblown. "Let me be clear," Sessler wrote in a recent review, "the game is not racist, insofar as it in no way attempts to advance an agenda of one group's superiority over another. Nonetheless the game does traffic in some truly loaded images, the most blatant of which are the residents of the native village who are adorned in grass skirts, tribal masks, and spears; images that held much currency through the centuries of colonial rule and were used to justify the imperialism vis-a-vis this 'otherness.'"

As disturbing as such images undoubtedly are, it is fair to wonder how they compare to the more visceral experience of using the Wii remote to simulate pointing and shooting, or as a mock weapon in an on-screen brawl or knife fight.

For Greg Sterling, founding principal of Sterling Market Intelligence, it raises some potentially troubling questions for the Wii brand.

"There's something more 'wholesome' and family friendly about the image of the Wii," Sterling said, "that questionable games such as Resident Evil potentially undermine. If I were Nintendo, I would want to maintain the 'Wii's innocence' and family appeal."

## Mike Tyson Makes Virtual Return to The Ring

Heavyweight boxer Mike Tyson is making a comeback - virtually.

Tyson will share the cover of EA Sports new Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 game, "Fight Night Round 4," with another former boxing champion, Muhammad Ali, with both appearing in the game as playable characters at the peak of their fighting careers.

"Ali was a special champ, and I have the highest respect for him as a person and a fighter," said Tyson, 43, the undisputed heavyweight champion for more than two years who retired in 2005 after a career marred with controversy.

"People always ask me if I think I would have beaten Ali if I had the chance to fight him when we were both in our prime. Now you can figure it out for yourselves. "Fight Night" puts you right in that ring and gives you the gloves to settle the score."

Although "Fight Night Round 4" will feature over 45 of the greatest boxers from the past and present, it's the match-up between Ali and Tyson that has garnered the most attention.

"These fighters are going to play to their strengths in this game," said Mike Mahar, producer of "Fight Night Round 4."

"Tyson is going to come barreling in at Ali throwing big upper cuts. Ali is going to use his speed and his reach to his advantage."

Tyson had a chance to play the game before its June 30 release and he said he didn't have much luck playing as himself, so he choose Joe Frazier and "kicked ass."

In some ways, Tyson's videogame career has mirrored the ups and down in his boxing career and personal life. Nicknamed "Iron Mike," Tyson was convicted of raping an 18-year-old beauty contest entrant in 1992 and served three years in prison.

A comeback bout against Evander Holyfield in 1996 ended in uproar and disqualification after Tyson bit off part of Holyfield's ear.

Tyson was featured in Nintendo's best-selling "Mike Tyson Punch-Out" in 1987 on the Nintendo Entertainment System, an early example of a video game endorsed by a professional athlete, which sold well.

Nintendo is bringing out a new version of "Punch-Out" to the Wii this March, but it will not include Tyson's character.

But Tyson didn't appear in any of EA Sports' "Fight Night" games that first appeared in 2004 because he signed a deal with game publisher Codemasters to do his own boxing game in 2000.

But both "Mike Tyson Boxing" and "Mike Tyson Heavyweight Boxing" ended up being critical and commercial failures, opening the way for Tyson to enter the ring with "Fight Night."

According to The NPD Group, EA has sold nearly 6 million copies of the "Fight Night" games in the United States alone.

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->A-ONE Gaming Online - Online Users Growl & Purr!  
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Racing the Beam: How Atari 2600's Crazy Hardware Changed Game Design

The Atari Video Computer System was, in fascinating ways, unlike any other videogame console.

As the first wildly successful home game machine, the VCS, also known as the Atari 2600, was in millions of homes for well over a decade after its 1977 release. Even after Atari fell out of favor and Nintendo took over the 8-bit game business, the company continued to produce VCS games and hardware until 1992. (Let's see if Nintendo is still manufacturing Wii consoles in 2021.)

The VCS' unrivaled longevity is all the more astounding when one considers that the hardware itself was nearly obsolete even when it was first released. The VCS' unique hardware limitations forced game designers to jump through all sorts of hoops to squeeze more complex game designs out of the VCS. In a new book from MIT Press titled *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System*, media studies professors Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost present an engaging, fascinating look at the VCS platform and how it changed the nature of game design.

"The minimal but exploitable design of the VCS showed how long unexpected tricks and techniques could continue to be developed on a platform, over more than a decade. It showed that there's more to a console than is understood when it's first released," says Bogost.

In the book, Montfort and Bogost explain that the primary difference between the VCS and most every other game console is the machine's lack of a "frame buffer." This is the section of a system's RAM that saves the image data for each successive screen that the game displays. The programmer writes each image to RAM, and they are flashed up onto the television screen in succession.

The Atari VCS had a minuscule 128 bytes (that's bytes) of RAM, not nearly enough for a frame buffer. So programmers had to generate graphics literally in real time, drawing on the screen as the television screen's electron gun was passing over the tube.

As illustrated in this image from *Racing the Beam*, the electron gun's movement included three large spaces where it was not drawing on the screen: the vertical and horizontal "blanks" on the top and left, and the "overscan" on the bottom. These blind spots were crucial for Atari programmers, as these were the only times they could do anything that didn't involve drawing graphics on the screen, such as computing joystick inputs, player movements, scoring, etc.

If you've ever seen little black lines appear at the left edge of the screen while you're playing a VCS game, those are bits of the game's code where the program is taking too much time doing other calculations, and it can't draw on the screen, leaving it blank. The black bar on the left-hand side of the Pitfall! screen at top was Activision designers' solution - they cut out part of the gameplay field in exchange for more processing time.

As if all this weren't enough, the VCS could only display five interactive objects at any one time: two "player" sprites, two "missile" sprites, and one "ball." This was more than enough for replicating Pong and Tank, the popular arcade games of 1977. It was useless for anything even slightly more complicated, such as Space Invaders.

What saved the VCS, ironically, was the lack of a frame buffer. Yes, the system could only display two sprites at any given moment. But once the electron beam had drawn a sprite, the program could shift the position of said sprite horizontally and redraw it. But because the sprite had already been drawn on the screen, the original one would not disappear until the electron gun came back around to redraw the screen. By doing this, programmers could create rows and rows of sprites - perfect for Space Invaders' rows of aliens.

Eventually, use of these techniques allowed designers to create scenes on the VCS that were significantly more detailed than the hardware maker had ever imagined. Consider again the Pitfall screen at top. The tiny details in the tree's branches are drawn with sprites. When Pitfall Harry swings on a vine, that vine is drawn with the "ball" graphic intended for games of Pong.

Many of the most popular Atari VCS games were ports of popular arcade titles, a staple of the videogame industry that lasted long past the VCS' heyday. "The porting of arcade games to home systems was first really worked through on the VCS," says Bogost. "It was because of this VCS development that developers were able to figure out what to try to carry over and what to leave behind, and how to adapt the arcade experience for more limited consoles that would be played at home."

The most popular, and most notorious, arcade-to-Atari port was Pac-Man, released in 1981. The general consensus, then and now, is that the VCS version of Pac-Man totally sucks. The visual appeal of the arcade game is totally lost, and the gameplay doesn't fare much better in translation. It's considered to be one of the games that helped cause Atari's downfall.

But after you learn about the VCS hardware, its version of Pac-Man starts to seem more like a crowning achievement, not a massive stumble. If the 2600 could only display a handful of sprites on screen, how would a designer create a screen full of dots that could be individually eaten in any order? The answer turned out to be creating the dots using the same "playfield" graphics as the maze, so that every time you eat a dot, the game redraws the entire background.

Racing the Beam is an excellent book, chock full of fascinating tidbits that I've only scratched the surface of here. Other groundbreaking games examined in its chapters include Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back and Adventure. Montfort and Bogost say it is the first in a series of "platform studies" that take an accessible, academically focused look at how gaming platforms affect how games are created.

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A-ONE's Headline News  
The Latest in Computer Technology News  
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

US Struggles To Pinpoint Cyber Attacks

The United States often cannot quickly or reliably trace a cyber attack back to its source, even as rival nations and extremists may be looking to wage virtual war, a top official warned Tuesday.

"It often takes weeks and sometimes months of subsequent investigation," said US intelligence director Dennis Blair, "and even at the end of very long investigations you're not quite sure" who carried out the offensive.

China, Russia and other countries already could be potent online foes and terrorists may find it easier in the future to hire hackers to target key systems, Blair told the Senate Armed Services Committee.

"Terrorists are interested in using cyberweapons, just the way they're interested in using most any weapon they can use against us," notably to target systems critical to the high-tech driven US economy, he said.

"We currently assess that their capability does not match their ambitions in that area, although that's something we have to work on all the time because things become more widespread, terrorists can find hackers to work for them," he said.

"It is a concern, but right now I'd say their capability is low and, in addition, I think the more spectacular attacks that kill a lot of people on very publicly is what they are looking for," said Blair.

Blair told the panel, which was looking at global threats to US interests, that Washington is "absolutely" trying to speed up what is now the "very slow and painstaking" process of determining who carried out a cyberattack.

Countries Move Forward on Cybercrime Treaty

Countries are ratifying the only global cybercrime treaty slower than expected, but many are closer to implementing it, a senior Council of Europe official said Wednesday.

The Convention on Cybercrime, adopted in 2001, defines legal guidelines for countries seeking to establish effective laws against computer crime. The Council of Europe (COE), an organization composed of 47 European countries, has spearheaded a drive to help countries either create computer crime laws or bring existing ones in line with the treaty.

So far 24 countries have ratified it, with Germany being the latest one earlier this week. Twenty-three others have signed it but not ratified it. The COE was hoping that as many as 40 countries would have ratified it by the year, but the pace has been slower than expected, said Alexander Seger, head of the COE's economic crime division.

"When we look at every single case, there is an explanation," Seger said during an interview Wednesday at the COE's International Conference on Cybercrime in Strasbourg, France. "On the other hand, I also believe countries should have made stronger efforts."

There are other reasons. One is that countries must have fully implemented laws complying with the treaty before they can sign it, Seger said. That's different from other international treaties, where countries can often sign on before complying, he said.

It means that nations must first revise their own laws, a process that takes time and can be disrupted by changes in administrations.

"There are sometimes long discussions that take place," Seger said.

Since 2006, the COE has provided legal expertise to help countries comply with the treaty. The first phase of the project, called the Project on Cybercrime, ended last month. The Council, Microsoft and Estonia provided funds for the US\$1.5 million program, Seger said.

The second phase of the program started last month and will run through June 2011. It will again focus on legislative compliance and other initiatives, such as the 24/7 Network. Under the treaty, countries are required to have a computer security professional on hand at all times in order to assist other countries with breaking cybercrime investigations.

Many countries are very close to ratifying the Convention. Countries outside the COE are invited to accede to the treaty, which means they conform to it like a COE member state.

In a few weeks, Serbia's Parliament is expected to ratify the treaty, Seger said. The Dominican Republic has also passed a good computer crime law, putting it on the path to accession.

Strong progress is also being made in Asia, where the Council expected less enthusiasm since the treaty originated in Europe.

"The doors are wide open," Seger said. "It shows that countries are really looking for guidance in how they can cope with new technologies, the regulatory framework and how to deal with cybercrime."

The Philippines has been invited to accede to the Convention along with Mexico and Costa Rica. Indonesia is also almost 90 percent complete in its cybercrime law development, Seger said.

Laos and Cambodia do not have specific computer crime laws. However, the Council has translated the Convention into Lao, which has kick-started work in that country. Vietnam is undertaking a rewrite of its criminal code and also asked for assistance. Vietnam wants "us to come as soon as possible," Seger said.

This year, the Council has seen seven new countries attend the cybercrime conference, including Congo, Kenya, and Botswana, Seger said. Sixty-five countries were represented last year; 72 are represented at

the conference this week.

#### U.S. Privacy Bill on Internet Companies Coming

A top U.S. lawmaker in the U.S. House of Representatives on Wednesday said he is working to develop a bill to impose mandatory guidelines on Internet companies to protect user privacy, because the current voluntary approach is falling short.

Rep. Rick Boucher, a Democrat from Virginia that heads the telecommunications subcommittee of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, described his intent as putting "mandatory guidelines applicable to all Websites."

Privacy advocates say regulations on big Internet and phone companies are too lax, giving the firms excessive control over consumers' personal information.

"I do believe that there should be a minimum set of statutory requirements that should apply to all behavioral advertising," the congressman said in an interview with Reuters.

He said he is working very closely with Republican Rep. Cliff Stearns and Rep. Joe Barton, ranking Republicans on the subcommittee and full committee, respectively.

"We will be doing this together," he said.

Earlier today, Google Inc introduced a new plan to target consumers using so-called behavioral advertising, in which a content company, Internet service provider, or intermediary firm tracks an individual's online use over time to target ads.

Boucher said he did not have all the details he needed on the plan. But he said he will judge it based on how prominent the notice of Google's policy is displayed, how concisely it is stated and how understandable it is to consumers.

#### Spot the Tiny Phishing Trick

The TinyURL service allows you to enter a long URL, such as one for a particular Google Maps location, and convert it into a short, easy-to-type or e-mail link. Good for sending links - or as Trend Micro reports, for hiding a malicious Web site URL in a phishing e-mail.

Trend says the dirty trick, which it first reported on in February, is becoming more popular and spreading into multiple languages. The ruse is intended to make it more difficult for the wary to immediately peg a link as suspicious when they mouseover a link to see where it actually goes.

Of course, you'd probably be just as suspicious if you receive an e-mail that purports to be from your bank but uses a TinyURL, but Trend also writes that the technique is being used for IM-based phishing with messages that pretend to come from a friend.

If you suspect that a TinyURL link you've received might hide a malicious URL, you can check it out without clicking the link. First copy the link to the clipboard and paste it into your browser's address bar, or type it in directly. Then type 'preview' before the address, so that <http://tinyurl.com/g0hz> would become <http://preview.tinyurl.com/g0hz>, for example.

Then hit enter to bring up a preview page, and you'll see the the full URL used for the TinyURL link without actually bringing up the linked-to page. If you want to see if that link has been reported as a phishing site, or if you want to report it as such yourself, cut and paste the (real) link and enter it on <http://www.phishtank.com>.

#### Microsoft Restores Service After Hotmail Outage

Microsoft scrambled to fix a global outage that hit its Windows Live Hotmail service for several hours on Thursday.

The company said in a blog posting that "service has been restored for all users" around 5 p.m. Eastern Time and that it was "taking steps to make sure this doesn't happen again." It also apologized to Hotmail users for the inconvenience but did not say what caused the problem.

Hotmail users across the globe Twittered widely about the outage, which Microsoft said it first began hearing reports of at around 12 p.m. Eastern Time.

Twitter users said they were receiving a "Server is too busy" message when they tried to log into Hotmail, which has more than 375 million active users worldwide, according to Microsoft.

The Twitter reports were so widespread that Microsoft even sent out a message on its own WindowsLive Twitter feed letting people know it was aware of the outage, and then again when the outage was repaired.

This was the second outage for a major online e-mail service this week. On Monday, Google's Gmail service went down for as many as 24 to 36 hours for some users.

For Microsoft and Google, which are competing to bring more Web-based services to consumers and businesses, e-mail has been a proving ground for how many users their online services can support. Outages raise questions about the ability of those companies and other online service providers to maintain a consistent quality of service for end-users.

#### Gmail Down; Outage Could Last 36 Hours for Some People

Google's Gmail e-mail service is down for an undetermined number of users, and while the outage has been partially fixed, some people could be locked out of their accounts for many more hours.

In its latest update about the problem, posted at around 9:30 a.m. U.S. Eastern Time on Tuesday, Google said that it could take between 24 hours

to 36 hours from that moment to restore all affected accounts.

The issue, which at its peak affected "a small subset of users," prevents people from accessing their accounts. About two weeks ago, Gmail suffered a major outage that affected many of its users worldwide and lasted for two and a half hours. Gmail also ran into problems several times in August and October of last year.

The outages affect all types of people, from casual users who use Gmail for personal communications to those who rely on it for their work e-mail as part of the Google Apps hosted collaboration and communication suite. This is because Google serves all of its Gmail users from the same data-center infrastructure, including Apps Premier users, who pay for their service and are covered by a 99.9 percent uptime commitment.

One outage, on Aug. 11, lasted about two hours, but affected almost all Apps Premier users. Others on Aug. 6 and Aug. 15 hit a small number of Apps Premier users, but both outages were lengthy, affecting some users for more than 24 hours. In all of the incidents, users were unable to access their Gmail accounts. In mid-October, an outage locked some affected users out of their Gmail accounts for about 30 hours. Later that same month, a glitch delayed by days the activation of the Gmail service for new Apps subscribers, leaving them without e-mail access during that time.

Performance and availability problems continue to be among the main objections and concerns about Web-hosted applications, which reside on the Internet "cloud" and are gaining popularity among IT managers and CIOs. There are also concerns about security and privacy. This weekend, a Google glitch made some Apps files accessible to unauthorized users in a small number of accounts.

Asked why some Gmail outages last more than 24 hours, Matthew Glotzbach, product management director of Google's Enterprise, told IDG News Service in November 2008 that those instances are "very rare."

All Gmail users have their data served from two separate locations, as a failover provision, but in the infrequent cases where the backup option doesn't kick in, then a lengthier restoration process has to take place, he said at the time.

"Any time there's an outage, the vast majority - 99-plus percent of people - don't experience any issue because we automatically fail them over to the other location," he said.

"Where there are problems is in the cases where we can't fail that user over [to the backup] for whatever reason - there's an error with the account, or the master and the slave [copies] are out of sync. So in a few circumstances, we have been unable to fail a user over and we can't restore that user's access to the service until we restore that physical location. This is an area where we're constantly getting better and some of the things we've done as a result of our learnings over the last few months address that," he added.

#### Google's Openness Intensifies Focus on E-mail Woes

Google Inc.'s recent pledge to be more open about periodic service outages

appears to be drawing more attention to the breakdowns when they occur, even if it's a minor hiccup affecting a sliver of its users.

A prime example of the phenomenon surfaced Tuesday and Wednesday when some of Google's e-mail users couldn't get into their accounts. The outage occurred around 2 a.m. Pacific time Tuesday, with most of the affected users regaining access to their e-mail within 30 minutes.

A "small subset" of Gmail's more than 100 million users were locked out of their e-mail until early Wednesday morning, according to Google. Company spokesman Andrew Kovacs declined to elaborate on how many people couldn't get their Gmail or what parts of the world were affected.

Word of the trouble quickly spread because two weeks ago Google set up a Web page showing the status of all its online applications after a worldwide outage locked people out of their e-mail for 2 1/2 to four hours. Last month's problems were so severe that Google even gave service credits to businesses and organizations that subscribe to a premium version of its e-mail program.

The service updates, available at <http://www.google.com/appsstatus>, disclose problems even if the outages involve fewer than 10 people. But Google makes it difficult to know precisely how many people actually are affected because the Internet leader steadfastly refuses to give those specifics.

By making it easier for the public to see when there's a problem, Google also has made it easier for bloggers and reporters to write about the trouble.

Other major providers of free e-mail services aren't as transparent about their outages.

Microsoft Corp. offers a help center with a community board where users can report problems.

A quick check of that board late Wednesday found numerous complaints about Microsoft's e-mail service being unavailable, with some users asserting they had been cut off from their accounts for three days. Microsoft responded with a post that the service was having "login issues."

#### Dell Plans All-in-One Touchscreen PC with Style

Last week, Apple refreshed its one-piece iMac line, and now Dell plans a one-piece computer. Called the Studio One 19, the new desktop was announced Thursday and will be launched in Japan next week.

The computer maker said a U.S. rollout is expected later this spring. The Studio One 19 features an optional multi-touch screen, a hard drive of up to 750GB, and a starting price of \$699.

A major targeted environment for the Studio One 19 is the kitchen. "More and more people are making the kitchen the center of their entertainment and computing experience," said Alex Gruzen, Dell senior vice president of consumer products. The new model, he continued, is "the ideal system for that need" because of its form factor, its capabilities, and a

pricing that is "very affordable for the family."

The lifestyle and design aspect is being emphasized. The Studio One 19 is made with aluminum, glass and fabric, which Dell expects will offer a "style statement" that people will want to display rather than park in a corner. Colors include Solid Pure White, Tuscan Red, Navy Blue, Powder Pink, and Charcoal.

In addition to the footprint and the style, the Studio One 19 is being promoted for its multimedia capabilities. If the multi-touch option is chosen, that kind of interaction can be used for photo editing, slideshow creation, playlist building, note-taking, and Web browsing.

You Paint finger-painting software offers a playful means of expression without the mess, and there's a multi-touch percussion center for creating music. Videos can be recorded and uploaded right to YouTube with touch controls and, similarly, photos can easily be uploaded to Flickr.

Options for processors include the Intel Celeron, Dual Core Celeron, Pentium Dual Core, Core 2 Duo, or Core 2 Quad Core. Integrated graphics options include the Nvidia GeForce 9200 or GeForce 9400. There are six USB ports and dual-channel memory is available up to 4GB.

Media input includes a slot-load optical drive and a 7-in-1 media-card reader. A Web camera, Blu-ray Disc drive, and wireless capability are options, as is face-recognition security, which requires the Web cam.

Doug Bell, an analyst for industry research firm IDC, called the Studio One 19 "a very nice product." He pointed out that this isn't Dell's first all-in-one product, but multi-touch could be a key differentiator in helping to make the model popular in the kitchen and living room.

"Relatively speaking," Bell said, the Studio One 19 "has great specs and some nice bells and whistles." Although PC sales are down in many categories, he noted, the "all-in-one PC form factor is a bright spot" and growing.

#### Firefox 3.1 (Or Is It 3.5?) Beta 3 Released by Mozilla

The next version of Firefox is almost fully baked, with the release of what one would assume is the penultimate beta test version on Thursday.

Some of the major differences from beta 2 involve the browser's Private Browsing Mode, TraceMonkey JavaScript engine, and new standards support. The release comes just a week before the expected final release of Microsoft's market-leading Internet Explorer 8.

One oddity on Mozilla's Developer Center Web pages is that the browser PCMag.com questioned Mozilla reps, they pointed us to a post by Firefox head honcho Mike Beltzner, entitled "Firefox 3.1 may become Firefox 3.5."

In the post, Beltzner posits that "Shireteko," the codename for the next browser version, is far more than a small incremental improvement and therefore may merit a larger version jump. The post goes on to propose that the next beta of what was version 3.1 be called Firefox 3.5 beta - somewhat confusing, but with its own logic nevertheless. The

nomenclature on the developer pages indicates that this proposal has taken hold.

Firefox 3.1's (or 3.5's) Private Browsing Mode, similar to Internet Explorer 8's InPrivate mode, aims at removing any trace of a browsing session the user engages in while in the mode. Tech journalist-pundits have dubbed both features "porn mode." Records of pages that are visited, form entries, passwords, downloads, cookies, and cache files are all discarded for these private browsing sessions. Unlike Internet Explorer 8's implementation, however, the feature doesn't prevent third-party sites from tracking your activities on visited sites.

Another significant change to the new build is that its TraceMonkey JavaScript engine has improved in performance and stability. In PCMag.com Labs testing, the new beta's result on the SunSpider JavaScript benchmark was 3,045 ms, pretty much in line with previous testing of version 3.1 builds. It's still slightly behind Chrome's 2,689 ms, but significantly ahead of Internet Explorer 8's 10,108 ms. Keep in mind, however, that JavaScript performance is not the be-all and end-all of browser performance.

Other changes in this beta from the previous version will be mostly of interest to Web developers: Native support for the JSON (JavaScript Object Notation), improvements to web worker thread support, support for new web technologies such as the `and` elements, the W3C Geolocation API, JavaScript query selectors, CSS 2.1 and 3 properties, SVG transforms, and offline applications.

The beta is available for download in 64 languages and for Windows, Macintosh, and Linux operating systems. According to the open source project's planning calendar overseen by the Mozilla Foundation, only one more beta version is scheduled, with no date given. A Mozilla representative did confirm to us that one more beta version is planned, with a final release expected this summer.

## OLPC Set To Dump X86 for Arm Chips in XO-2

One Laptop Per Child is set to dump x86 processors, instead opting to put low-power Arm-based processors in its next-generation XO-2 laptop with the aim of improving battery life.

The nonprofit is "almost" committed to putting the Arm-based chip in the next-generation XO-2 laptop, which is due for release in 18 months, said Nicholas Negroponte, chairman of OLPC. The XO-1 laptop currently ships with Advanced Micro Devices' aging Geode chip, which is based on an x86 design.

OLPC's goal is to extend the battery life of the XO-2 laptop while building in more functionality than is in the XO-1, said Ed McNierney, chief technology officer at OLPC. OLPC officials said Arm-based integrated chips will draw less power than x86 integrated chips while building in functionality such as graphics and wireless networking.

"Our current XO-1 uses an average of 5 watts of power, and while most people think that's amazingly low, we think it's our biggest problem," McNierney said.

While x86 chips potentially could cut their power consumption, Arm-based chip makers have been paying more attention to low-power and power-management features on chips, McNierney said.

"We're seeing some very impressive system-on-chip (SOC) designs that provide both fundamentally low-power demands and the kind of fine-grained power management ... in the XO-1," McNierney said.

However, the Arm chip could lead to problems for XO-2 in trying to load a full version of Windows, Negroponte said. As with the XO-1, OLPC wants to offer a dual-boot option on XO-2 where users can choose to load either Linux or a full Windows OS. While Arm processors can run Windows Mobile operating systems, they can't run a full Windows OS.

"Like many, we are urging Microsoft to make Windows - not Windows Mobile - available on the Arm. This is a complex question for them," Negroponte said.

OLPC is in talks with Microsoft to develop a version of a full Windows OS for XO-2, Negroponte said. The XO-2 is still 18 months away from release, so "a lot can change with regard to Microsoft and Arm," Negroponte said.

Microsoft did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Designed for use by children in developing countries, the XO laptop has been praised for its innovative hardware features and environmentally friendly design. In the same vein, XO-2 is also being engineered with hardware and software features that OLPC hopes will appeal to kids in primary schools.

The XO-2 will include a software-designed, touch-sensitive keyboard and two touch-screen displays. It can be both a traditional laptop and an e-book reader, a tablet and even a piano with its touch-based input, McNierney said.

The nonprofit is also aggressive in efforts to increase the battery life of XO-2 laptops in situations where power is unreliable or unavailable. The laptop may carry current XO laptop features, including the ability to run on solar power, foot pedal or pull-string.

Plans to add wireless networking features such as WiMax and 3G to XO-2 are also on OLPC's table, McNierney said. OLPC is especially considering WiMax, which offers specific power benefits that could improve laptop battery life, he said. WiMax networks have already been rolled out in many developing countries.

"But everything has to first fit in a very, very tight power budget, and if it can't be done at low power, it can't be done," McNierney said.

OLPC can't implement all its ideas in XO-2, so it ultimately wants to "open source" the hardware design to other PC makers for use in building devices, McNierney said. He hopes that opening up the hardware design will spur the development of a "rich family of devices" that accelerate the adoption of the XO-2 technology.

"One size doesn't fit all, even in the countries we're targeting, but OLPC can't design a dozen variations of the XO-2 all by ourselves," McNierney said.

Arm designs low-power integrated chips that are licensed by many chip makers for use in mobile devices. Though found mostly in smartphones, Arm chips are now making their way into low-cost laptops. Freescale is chasing the netbook market with its i.MX515 chip, which is based on the Cortex-A8 Arm core and includes a 1GHz CPU, 3D graphics and high-definition video support. Qualcomm offers the Arm-based Snapdragon chip for netbooks, which integrates a 1GHz CPU, 3D graphics, video capabilities and GPS.

Switching to an Arm processor could also help OLPC partner with more chip makers for input on chip design, McNierney said. Rather than relying on a small number of vendors for chips as it did for XO-1, using more partners could give the nonprofit flexibility and choice in acquiring chips.

#### Maine Expanding School Laptop Program with Apple

Despite the economic turmoil, Maine is expanding its program to provide laptop computers to students.

Maine started its first-in-the-nation program by distributing more than 30,000 computers to each seventh- and eighth-grader in all of the state's public schools in 2002 and 2003. Now the goal is to provide a laptop to every public school student in grades 7-12 by the fall.

About 30 high schools already have laptops that they obtained outside the scope of the original program. But now all 120 of Maine's high schools, along with 241 middle schools, will have new laptops under the same program, at a cost of about \$242 per computer per year, said Education Commissioner Susan Gendron.

Education Department officials announced this week that they're negotiating a four-year lease with Apple Inc. for 100,000 Apple MacBook laptops.

Gov. John Baldacci said in his State of the State address Tuesday night that revamping the laptop computer program would turn it "into a powerful tool for the entire family."

"Every night when students in seventh through 12th grade bring those computers home, they'll connect the whole family to new opportunities and new resources," Baldacci said. The computers would come with software to connect to the state's career centers, he added.

The state hasn't yet completed its negotiations with Apple, but it's expected that the new lease will cost the state about \$25 million per year, said David Connerty-Marin, an Education Department spokesman.

An Apple spokesman in Cupertino, Calif., referred questions to the governor's office.

The state currently pays about \$13 million per year to provide Apple laptops to 37,000 middle-schoolers and about 10,000 middle school and high school teachers and administrators. The expansion would add 53,000 high schoolers to the program.

At a time when state lawmakers are facing a two-year budget shortfall of

more than \$800 million, Baldacci pointed out that the program expansion is being done within existing resources and won't require additional taxes.

School administrators say the laptop program, aimed at eliminating the so-called "digital divide" between wealthy and poor students, has been a success. A study released in 2007 by the Maine Education Policy Research Institute at the University of Southern Maine indicated writing scores improved after laptops were introduced.

#### eBay's PayPal Envisions Doubling in Size by 2011

EBay Inc.'s name may conjure images of online auctions, but the company is hoping to turn attention to its second-largest business - PayPal - which it expects to blossom significantly in the next few years.

That could be a welcome boost for eBay, which posted drops in revenue and profit in the last quarter and has seen its stock lose 80 percent of its value since late 2004.

Speaking Wednesday during a day of briefings for analysts, PayPal President Scott Thompson said the service should double in size in the next three years, processing between \$100 billion and \$120 billion in annual payments by 2011.

PayPal, which has 70 million active user accounts, processed \$60 billion in transactions in 2008. It runs local sites in 17 languages and accepts 19 currencies for transactions.

PayPal, which takes a cut of transactions, reported \$2.4 billion in 2008 revenue, while eBay as a whole had revenue of \$8.5 billion. The projected increase in PayPal's volume would translate into \$4 billion to \$5 billion in revenue in 2011, Thompson said.

PayPal plans to do this by continuing to grow on eBay itself and by increasing the service's use among merchants that are not part of eBay. PayPal wants to handle more mobile transactions and payments for businesses like banks, non-profits and online social networks.

"It doesn't matter where you go online today," Thompson said. "Almost everybody needs a fast, secure way to pay for something."

PayPal is still combining its operations with Bill Me Later, a company eBay bought in October that lets online retailers extend credit to shoppers without requiring detailed application forms. This will let people choose to pay for purchases immediately through PayPal or be billed down the road through Bill Me Later.

#### Report Slams "Crude" Effort To Fight Web Militants

Western governments have overstated the role the Internet plays in the recruitment of militants, and measures to block extremist material are "crude, expensive and counterproductive," a report said on Tuesday.

Any attempts to filter or restrict access to sites grooming potential

suicide bombers would be impractical and ineffective, said the study by the International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR) in London.

In fact there was little politicians could do, said the report, which brought together government, industry and experts to look at the issue.

"Self-radicalization and self-recruitment via the Internet with little or no relation to the outside world rarely happens, and there is no reason to suppose that this situation will change in the near future," it said. "Indeed it is largely ineffective at drawing in new recruits."

For years, governments and security agencies have warned that the Web was allowing extremists, particularly Islamist militants, to recruit and radicalize people to their causes.

Former U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff once said recruits no longer needed to travel to al Qaeda camps overseas, and the European Commission has suggested trying to block online searches for material such as bomb-making recipes.

Last week a report found extremist groups in Southeast Asia were increasingly using the Web to radicalize youths.

However, the study suggested fears about the radicalizing power of the Internet appeared misplaced. Peter Neumann, head of the ICSR, said there had been only four or five reported cases across Europe where the process had taken place wholly online.

He told Reuters that Internet Service Providers could do more to deal with users' complaints about extremist material, and governments would regulate if the ISPs failed to bring in a system to better police content.

But it was a fallacy that "there is some sort of switch that can be pressed and you can eliminate all extremist radicalizing content from the Internet."

Officials have argued that it should be possible to filter militant material in the same way authorities crack down on child pornography.

But the report said this analogy was flawed: issues surrounding militant content are less clear cut, and it is politically hard to decide what is illegal and what is merely offensive.

Removed websites can soon crop up again using a different Internet Service Provider (ISP); filtering methods are either too crude (because they block legitimate sites), too expensive (as they need constant updating), or they impede Internet traffic.

Meanwhile almost nothing can be done to target chat rooms, and networking sites, the report said,

While most of the focus has been on al Qaeda-inspired Islamist militants, far-right white supremacist sites are equally as popular, the report found.

Are you spending hours and hours on Facebook? If so, you are not alone.

Networking and blogging sites account for almost ten percent of time spent on the internet - more than on email.

Time on the sites ranked fourth, after online searching, general interest sites, and software sites, according to a study released by Nielsen Online..

"While two-thirds of the global online population already accesses member community sites, their vigorous adoption and the migration of time show no signs of slowing," said John Burbank, the CEO of Nielsen Online.

One in every 11 minutes spent online globally is on networking sites. Between December 2007 and December 2008, the time spent on the sites climbed 63 percent to 45 billion minutes.

The figure was even higher for the world's most popular networking site, Facebook, where members spent 20.5 billion minutes, up 566 percent from 3.1 percent the previous year, according to the study.

More people are also visiting networking sites. In the past year, the reach of online networking sites grew more than 5 percent.

Brazilians are the most avid fans of networking sites, according to the report. Eighty percent of online Brazilians visit networking sites. They also spend the largest portion of their time online - 23 percent - on networking sites.

Although Facebook is the most popular networking site globally, with 108.3 million unique visitors, preferences differ by nationality.

Facebook is the top site in Australia, Spain, Switzerland, France, the United Kingdom and Italy. But Americans favor MySpace, in Japan, local site Mixi reigns, and in Brazil, Google's networking site, Orkut, is number one.

Many social networking sites were originally geared toward younger audiences, but the sites are no longer just for kids, the report showed.

The biggest growth in Facebook membership comes from the 35-49 year old set. Facebook has added twice as many 50-64 year old visitors as it has visitors under 18.

In the United Kingdom, if current trends continue there will be as many 35-49 year olds on Facebook as 18-34 year olds by mid-June 2009.

### Grandpa Is ... Browsing Your Facebook Page

When your 88-year-old grandfather sends a request to be your "friend" on Facebook, you have two choices: Either confirm it, then quickly take down all those party pictures you thought were so funny, or plan on never coming home for the holidays.

As someone who lists pinot grigio as a hobby, I was seriously concerned

about my grandfather joining Facebook.

I was worried my grandfather would get the wrong idea about me. Or worse yet, he'd find out exactly who I was - not the teetotaling granddaughter I try to portray twice a year when I go home.

And that's just what happened: We got to know each other through a social networking site that many 30-somethings haven't learned to use, let alone octogenarians.

"I don't browse Facebook much, but I see that it is a way to get to the nitty-gritty of a person's character," my grandfather explained. "Also a way to do something late at night when I can't sleep."

Turns out, my grandfather isn't the only one with an AARP card using social networking sites.

Facebook estimates that it has a few million users over the age of 65. MySpace claims to have 6.7 million users age 65 and over on its site. In fact, according to MySpace spokeswoman Jessica Bass, older users are among the site's fastest growing demographic.

Seventy-one-year-old Lynne Bundesen of Santa Fe, N.M., is one of them. Why did she join? "To keep track of what my grandchildren are doing, of course," she said.

Her grandson, 27-year-old Russell Simon, knows that but doesn't mind.

"It keeps her young to be on there, in more ways than one," he said. "She puts these very young pictures of herself up there. She was beautiful. Just seeing her when she was young, out on a boat with her hair flowing, it makes me think of her differently."

"But mostly, it's so she can spy on us, not so we can learn about her," he said half-jokingly.

Simon actually has three grandparents on Facebook. And he admits that having them there has changed his online behavior.

"When you do status updates - sometime I forget that they're on - I have to look at it a different way," he said.

Not everyone is thrilled with the Baby Boomers' discovery of such sites. Some young people have responded by searching out new ways to stay a step ahead of grandma, moving from Facebook to Twitter, for example.

"I think that these developments might be the death of Facebook," said Simon's friend, Charlie Pabst.

Social networking sites are still predominantly used by a younger population. The median ages of MySpace and Facebook users were 26 and 27 years old, respectively. At the career-focused LinkedIn, it was 40, according to a recent report by the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

But there may be no escaping the onslaught from older relatives. Bundesen also uses Twitter to update her status. "I'm adapting to their lifestyle," she explained.

Like some younger users, my grandfather initially joined looking to connect to old classmates - in his case, any that were still alive.

He wasn't so successful there. But soon, he found that he could use it to stay in touch with grandchildren near and far.

I spent a fair amount of time around my grandfather growing up in Colorado. But truthfully, I never really knew him - his personality, his war stories, the story of how he and my grandmother met.

After my grandmother passed away last year, my grandfather found himself alone for the first time in 65 years. He was looking for ways to occupy his time.

So this summer, about six months after becoming a widower, 88-year-old Howard Hilt of Pueblo, Colo., joined Facebook and got to know his granddaughter in New Jersey. For better or worse.

When I posted a status update about running my first mile since recovering from ankle surgery, he wrote on my page: "That's the way to go Tiger!"

He also comments on pictures.

"I sure look my age in this one, and not too good in the others either," he said of one recent picture my cousin posted. "Candid shots are too stark for me, I think."

When I sent him a list of 25 random things about me, he returned the favor with a list of "Notes about me, Grandpa Hilt."

They were very different lists, to be sure.

He learned that I once met Magic Johnson and that that I don't prepare food using fire.

I learned that he used to make spare money as a kid by watering graveyard grass in Brooklyn; he flew B-24 bombers in WWII; and he worked for Anastasio Somoza Garcia, Dictator of Nicaragua, as a controller in his steamship agency's New York office.

"While in Managua on a business trip (my wife accompanied me), we became embroiled in an insurrection by communists and had a ducky time of it," he wrote.

But his No. 2 random thing was my favorite. It read: "Met my future wife in kindergarten."

Before that, I had no idea how or when my grandparents met.

And despite my initial concerns, he assures me that he hasn't been shocked by what he's seen.

The reason is simple: "At my age, nothing shocks me!"

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